



On the Fast Track acrylic on canvas 36 x 36 inches 2006

## An Unequal Music of Pause and Rupture

The first thing that strikes you about Dhruvi Acharya's paintings is their tactile skin, which is sometimes soft and buttery enough to melt in your eyes, at other times as smooth and unbreakably uniform as glass. But the moment you try to catch your reflection among the women figures who occupy this surface, it turns opaque. The provocation to viewers, to touch and feel their way around the artist's world, is summarily retracted. I would contend that this play of invitation and withdrawal is characteristic of Acharya's art. Her women figures appear insular, lonely even amidst friends and family. They play a double game of wanting to share their experiences and yet foreclose that possibility: the speech bubbles, or thought balloons, that emanate from their heads are often vacant. The flatness of Acharya's painted surface is ruptured by a choreography of half-revelations and silences.

Acharya's current suite of acrylics and watercolors, titled 'Two Plus Two Equals', explores the realm of dual responsibilities, multiple commitments and ambivalences of location. Commonsensical logic would suggest that an individual is simply the sum of these various self-investments, but psychology knows otherwise: each self-investment causes asymmetries and complications, which break down the simple logic of summation. The psychological logic of being various things and playing various roles can be as attritive as it can be additive.

Let us consider some of the dualities that Acharya reflects upon, which remain vexed even when they seem to have been integrated seamlessly. At the personal level, we have the artist performing the dual roles of creative agent and mother; the citizen inhabiting the culturally diverse worlds of Bombay and New York. At the level of image-making practice, we have the maker of sophisticated, abstractive colour-field backgrounds that crave the viewer's attention and the creator of communicative devices that carry their signals only erratically.

In 'On the Fast Track', a sky stretches out taut as a piece of laminated plastic; against it, a rather over-sized cowgirl looks back at the viewer, as if waiting for a cue to spring into a gallop. Her anxious eyes disappear like two black points on a white sheet. Like the cowgirl, Acharya's protagonists – rendered as semi-autobiographical variations – seem to be in an eternal dilemma, perpetually riddled with self-doubt but never lacking in humour. Acharya's protagonists are paradoxical creatures, at once familiar and strange. Insular creatures, they think aloud, their feelings registered in thought balloons that inflate, at times leak or even deflate in helplessness. In this world of *dromomania*, of jet-setting thoughts and flash actions, Acharya's cowgirl may not even jump a fence; similarly, many of her fellow protagonists are not ready to take the plunge, at least not yet. A shrunken thought balloon trails off the cowgirl's head instead of a colorful plume, and her lumpy body could just as well have ridden a stationary exercise bike.

The artist deploys the contrasting qualities of stillness and animation to orchestrate an unequal music of pause and rupture. Against a burnt-orange background, a woman stands transfixed in a 'Pond', a circle of uncertainty that she cannot step out of. The thought balloon grows into a stylised branch, a fossil silence. Many of Acharya's portraits are of middle-aged women who suffer the anxieties of an increasingly uncooperative body and a mind that is numbed by routine but not lacking in adventure.

The oddball and the quirky, staple features of comic-strip caricatures, relieve the tedium of anxiety and self-pity endured by the protagonists. A flaming red 'Mid-Life-Wife', set against a sedate cream background, summons the protagonist's attention. The bed cover is bristly with passion, its tassels singing. The occasion for this secret frolic is a nerdy text, a quote from the film 'Trainspotting', which dips in and out of visibility across the surface. Acharya is able to lighten even the sombre registers of the Indian miniatures. 'Pluck', a deceptively calm watercolour, shows us a woman whose hair has lost its shine and

whose bagged eyes rhyme with her fuddy-duddy shirt: she plucks buds or berries from a floating cloud, a mirage perhaps. The woman performs a riff on the cadences of a *nayika* from the miniatures: only, she is not a canonical beauty, the perfect embodiment of *shringara*. Acharya portrays her protagonist's tragicomic quest for grace in middle age with an attentive tenderness.



Acharya's work is quilted from various sources, blurring the line between high and low art, fine art and commercial art. Her visual arts education began in the field of applied arts: she has a degree in Visual Communication from Bombay's Sophia Polytechnic. With this, she was equipped with the virtues of draughtsmanship. Marriage took Acharya to the US in the mid-1990s and her hunger to express herself beyond the purview of 'skill' brought her to the Fine Arts course at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. Here, she trained under the noted American abstract expressionist Grace Hartigan and imbibed lessons in colour field, a strong and resonant feature in her current work. She was also exposed to the Indian miniature tradition. Acharya's early work was more drawing-based, as she obsessively recorded the comfort zones that she had left behind. Spaces shared with family and friends were resurrected with a fetishistic frenzy. Her works became increasingly layered with overlapping narratives and translucent and opaque surfaces. Acharya's women figures often shared pictorial space with a changing display of patterns composed from arabesques, curlicues, dot arrays and iterations of print-like motifs.

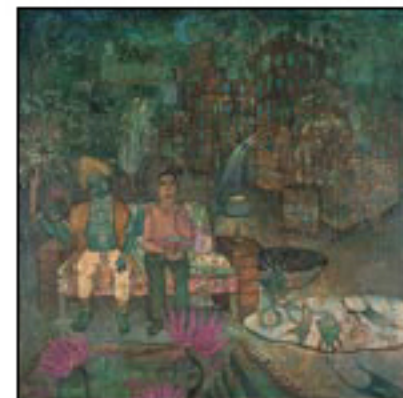


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The act of communication emerges as an important trope in Acharya's work. In 'Words', 2000, word-flames radiate from the protagonist's mouth, flung at an imaginary audience. Her relationship with the people she addresses is ambiguous: you are not sure whether she is urgently connecting with them or berating them with a 'poisoned tongue' (to quote the title of one of her works). Acharya's protagonists are often trying to establish contact: they are usually on the phone, or sit in front of a TV set, couch potatoes hypnotized by the promise of conversation. In 'My Friend the TV', 1999, the artist portrays herself in the act of painting. On the canvas, a hybrid beast comes to life, part-television, part-unicorn.

From the unicorn-TV's horn grows a speech bubble which breaks into spiky porcupine quills. The story of the artist, solitary in her studio, is clear. But the *punctum* of this pictorial narrative is the hybrid beast. In medieval allegory, the unicorn is a symbol of purity that does not know its own phallic nature; it can only be tamed by a virgin, and the allegory leaves unspoken the aftermath of this encounter. In Acharya's treatment, the unicorn-TV is a companion in solitude, but it does not leave unspoken its explicit narratives of sex, violence, mortality, threat.

Acharya's invitation into the world of broadcast technology holds us hostage, but when she admits us into the world of mythology, we are led into an exploration of inexhaustible stories. In 'Watching', 1999, the dark god Krishna, resplendent in full regalia, casually accompanies the artist at a TV-watching session. While she watches with captive attention – more out of habit than curiosity – Krishna becomes more a householder than a god, sedated by the programme, ready to nod off any moment. As they lose touch with reality, hexed by the talking box, the world outside is already inching its way into the room, threatening to break the spell. The illusory communication of the television has virtually



negated the possibility of real communication between Krishna and his contemporary *gopi*, his Net-age cowgirl. And no amount of thought balloons will help.

While the caricatural elements in Acharya's works are influenced by the Amar Chitra Katha comics that the artist devoured in childhood, they also owe allegiance to the work of the California Graffiti artists: Lari Pittman (b. 1952), Margaret L. Kilgallen (1967-2001) and Barry McGee (b. 1966). From them, she has imbibed a worldview where the formal strategies of folk art, caricature, mural painting and votive art can be integrated into a contemporary position without hierarchy or value judgment. She has assimilated some of the common features that unite their variegated approaches, such as the use of a layered approach and the positioning of the central figure against backgrounds of drips, patterns and colour fields. Acharya demonstrates great discipline and rigour in integrating Hartigan's colour-field training with her own interest in caricature and graffiti art, along with her abiding interest in the miniatures and the decorative arts.

It is only fitting that Acharya, who began with a degree in Visual Communications, continues to make images that intend to reach out to the viewer. In her last exhibition (Bombay, 2004), the thought balloons were teeming with life, chattering away, grinning toothily and growing snappish. Only, as we have noted, these thought balloons – unlike conventional speech balloons that convey the thoughts of the character – do not necessarily yield up their meaning. You are never sure what goes on in the minds of Acharya's protagonists.

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In her recent paintings, Acharya makes an effort to reveal an intimate relationship, through her anxiety for her son, who is embattled by peer pressure and by a pop culture that glorifies machismo. Her son is portrayed as an alien with a mask that spots antennae, feelers for a suspect world. Since Acharya now resides in Bombay, the angst of betweenness has given way to the fears of the known. As for her son, he must feel like an alien in a growing body and an environment steeped in everyday acts of violence. In the paintings, he escapes into the world of comics, where Superman, Batman and Spiderman can conquer the world in masked glory. The most enchanting works are small wooden tiles where the surface is covered with auras of colour that flow with the wooden grain. Here, a shadow game is enacted by Kara Walkeresque figures in dark silhouettes. A gang of children armed with bats and lathis play hide-and-seek with a baton-wielding ogre. But the children and the ogre inhabit separate universes; the game is choreographed in such a way that their paths do not cross. The game never exceeds the brief of a ceremonial, Disney-like violence.

The paintings revolving around her son may have liberated an impulse in the artist. She is able to go beyond the contradictions of the self. Acharya seems to have released herself from the temptation of self-pity and struck up a communion with others. Until now, she tended to portray her emotions as a tight skin wrapped around her body; but now she is able to express emotions which other people can share and participate in. Consider the watercolours: 'Women', where the thought balloon has turned into a gigantic pus boil brimming to bursting point; or 'Long Hair', in which a weird-looking woman in party dress, her brain on edge, bunches her fingers to punch an unsuspecting guest. We look forward to more such acute psychological portraiture.



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